



Demonstration of Wax Figures

Follower of Jan Havicksz. Steen, possibly
Richard Brakenburgh (Haarlem 1650–1703)

ca. 1685–95

oil on canvas

68.5 x 55.3 cm

JS-102

How To Cite

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Adults and children gaze in amazement at the contents of a cabinet containing wax figurines that a young man holds up for them to see. He is undoubtedly one of the Savoyards—natives of Savoy—who were well known as itinerant musicians (often seen with a hurdy-gurdy and a monkey) or, as in this case, showmen who demonstrated their tricks for a small fee. Although Savoyards generally had a bad reputation, no one in this crowd seems the least bit wary of his presence. This showman has attracted a range of onlookers, including an adolescent girl holding a toddler in her arms and two or three boys at her right, one of whom has placed his left arm on the shoulder of a smaller lad wearing a hat. A milkman and his wife are so engrossed in the performance that they do not notice that a dog is lapping up milk from the milkman's pail. An inquisitive young girl, hoping to enjoy the performance, enters the courtyard through the gate at the left. A young woman watches the goings-on from the door of the building as an older man stares at her, transfixed by her beauty. To the right of the children, an elderly woman observes the scene through *apince-nez*, unaware that the showman's young accomplice is reaching into her purse to steal from her. The boy simultaneously points at her and looks at the viewer, his mocking expression signifying both her stupidity and her gullibility.

The theme of this painting is “appearances are deceiving and people are inclined to be deceived.” This aphorism, popularized by Sebastian Brandt, well known as the author of *Narrenschip* (Ship of Fools) of 1494, is based on a saying attributed to Petronius (ca. 27–66 A.D.) “Mundus vult decipi, ergo decipiatur” (the world wants to be deceived, so let it be deceived).^[1] Brandt was also the compiler of *Paradoxa*, a collection of proverbs that appeared in 1542 and was responsible for the wide dissemination of many proverbs. Jan Steen, who often based his pictorial themes on such proverbs, used his illusionistic manner of painting to reinforce the idea of human deception and the absurdity of the world.



Fig 1. Jan Steen, *Little Alms Collector*, ca. 1665, oil on panel, 59 x 51 cm, Petit Palais, Paris, Legs Dutuit, 1902, PDUT00930



Fig 2. Willem van Mieris, *Peepshow*, 1718, oil on panel, 58 x 49 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, SK-A-4941



The façade of the building providing the backdrop to the assembled company is similar to that in Jan Steen's painting *Little Alms Collector*, ca. 1665, a depiction of the children's parade held at Whitsuntide (**fig 1**).^[2] Despite the similarity of the building and the gate in these two paintings, however, numerous small differences indicate that the scene is not an accurate rendering of an existing location.^[3] One difference, for example, is the flaking plaster on the building in *Little Alms Collector*, which is absent in *Demonstration of Wax Figures*.

Despite the compositional connections to *Little Alms Collector*, there are reasons to doubt the attribution of *Demonstration of Wax Figures* to Steen. First of all, the execution is quite smooth and too uninspired to be the work of this master. One searches in vain for the expressive rendering of clothing that Steen so depicted with painterly brilliance, often executed wet-into-wet.^[4] The meticulous execution of the heads of the secondary figures—such as the woman standing in the doorway and the girl holding a hoop, approaching from the left—is not typical of the cursory character in which the master depicted his supporting actors. Moreover, the facial features of the cutpurse cannot be reconciled with figure types from Steen's own hand.^[5]

One possibility is that the painting is based on a lost original by the master. This theory is premised, in part, by the existence of another slightly different version of the painting, also executed by a follower of Steen.^[6] Both versions may derive from a lost original by the master or, given the differences between them, from two lost originals.^[7] In the Leiden Collection painting, for example, the girl approaching from the left has in her hands a hoop and a stick; in the other version she holds a little windmill on a stick.^[8] The two figures in the doorway are also different: instead of a young woman and an older man leering at her, one sees a boy in a red cap and a young woman in a white cap who leans towards her companion. The clothing of the Savoyard's apprentice is also completely different in these two works.

With the regard to the dating, it is significant that a milkman occupies a central position in another of Steen's compositions, *Milkman*, which the artist executed in the late 1650s. The composition of this work is also similar, for the scene takes place in a courtyard with an archway opening to a distant vista.^[9] These similarities suggest that Steen's original composition, on which the Leiden Collection painting is based, probably also dated from the second half of the 1650s.

Perhaps Richard Brakenburgh, a follower of Jan Steen, who often created heads such as those of the background figures in this work, was the maker of the present painting. Although there is insufficient evidence to definitely attribute the work to him, it may be assumed that the painting was executed in the late seventeenth century, at a time when Brakenburgh was making his many free imitations of Steen, including, for example, *Feast of Saint Nicholas* and *Little Alms Collector*, a work for which he unmistakably drew inspiration from Steen's painting in the Petit Palais in Paris.^[10] An X-radiograph has revealed that the present work is painted over a male portrait, the style of which is not in keeping with that of Steen's few known portraits.^[11]

The theme of *Demonstration of Wax Figures* was the focus of a painting by Willem van Mieris (1662–1747), *Peepshow* (**fig 2**), which the Leiden artist made in 1718 for the prosperous Leiden collector Allard de la Court, who purchased it for the huge sum of 1,000 guilders.^[12] In those days Van Mieris's painting was also called *'t Fraaij curieus*, a title that imitates the cry ("vrai curieux") that the Savoyards sang in praise of their marvelous peepshows. The painting's Dutch title, *Rarekiek*, is derived from *kijken* (to look) and *raar* (strange, rare, or curious), the latter not so much in the sense of "strange" (the usual meaning of the Dutch word), but rather in the English sense of "curious" or "exceptional." As opposed to *Demonstration of Wax Figures*, Van Mieris's emphasis lies on the onlookers' surprise and the detailed depiction of the peasant interior, not on the deceit of simple folk who let themselves be fooled.

-Wouter Kloek

Endnotes

1. Similar sayings occur in the writings of Saint Augustine and Martin Luther.
2. Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century Based on the Work of John Smith*, 8 vols. (London, 1907–27), translated from *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*, 10 vols. (Esslingen and Paris, 1907–28), nos. 304, 307, 311; and K. Braun, *Alle schilderijen van Jan Steen* (Rotterdam, 1980), no. 246. See, in particular, H. Perry Chapman, Wouter Th. Kloek, and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Jan Steen, Painter and Storyteller*, ed. Guido Jansen (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (New Haven and

London, 1996), no. 26 (text by Arthur Wheelock).

3. The building is also similar to that in an etching by Adriaen van Ostade (1610–84/85), *The Knife Grinder* (B. 36), which the artist executed around 1653. A preparatory drawing is preserved in the British Museum in London; see S. William Pelletier, L. J. Slatkes, and L. Stone Ferrier, *Adriaen van Ostade: Etchings of Peasant Life in Holland's Golden Age* (Athens, Ga., 1994), 184–85, 266, no. 36. The resemblance was observed by Dominique Suhr.
4. This technique, which is characteristic of Steen's work, was first described by Marigene Butler in "An Investigation of the Technique and Materials Used by Jan Steen," *Bulletin of the Philadelphia Museum of Art* 78 (1982–83): 45–46. See also Martin Bijl, "The Artist's Working Method," in H. Perry Chapman, Wouter Th. Kloek, and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Jan Steen, Painter and Storyteller*, ed. Guido Jansen (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (New Haven and London, 1996), 89.
5. Doubt was first cast on the attribution to Steen at the RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie/Netherlands Institute for Art History), where the work was classified by Fred Meijer as by a follower of Steen, possibly Richard Brakenburgh.
6. In 1972 this painting was offered at an auction at Paul Brandt, Amsterdam on 16–19 May 1972, no. 92. In 1973 it was in the possession of L. Worms in Antwerp. It had formerly been in the collection of H. E. ter Kuile, Enschede and was with the art dealer D. Katz in Dieren.
7. See, for instance, *The Merry Family*, in versions in the Rijksmuseum and in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. See also *The Marriage of Tobias and Sarah* in Braunschweig and what is presumed to be an earlier version on the art market. For these works, see, respectively, K. Braun, *Alle schilderijen van Jan Steen* (Rotterdam, 1980), no. 134, no. 216, no. 281, and no. 308.
8. Children with toy windmills were seen as symbols of childlike innocence; see also the Dutch expression "met molentjes lopen" (literally "to walk with windmills").
9. For an image of this painting, see H. Perry Chapman, Wouter Th. Kloek, and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Jan Steen, Painter and Storyteller*, ed. Guido Jansen (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (New Haven and London, 1996), 124, fig. 3. This composition also survives in two versions. K. Braun, *Alle schilderijen van Jan Steen* (Rotterdam, 1980), nos. B-65 and 65a, wrongly doubts the attribution of both paintings to Steen. The first piece, presumably Steen's original, was shown at an exhibition devoted to Steen that was held at the Mauritshuis, 1958/59, no. 8.
10. This latter painting was sold at auction in Vienna, Christie's, 29–30 October 1996, no. 48, ill.
11. The few portraits by Steen, such as the famous *Burgomaster of Delft* and the four small portraits that Steen made for Gerrit Schouten provide no support for an autograph attribution. The *Self-Portrait* in the Rijksmuseum, which has a complicated genesis and

shows that Steen had an unexpected side as a portraitist, is the closest in comparison to the overpainted portrait. However, the similarities are insufficient grounds for an attribution. On these portraits, see H. Perry Chapman, Wouter Th. Kloek, and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Jan Steen, Painter and Storyteller*, ed. Guido Jansen (Exh. cat. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (New Haven and London, 1996), nos. 7, 29, 40.

12. See R. Baarsen et al., *Nederlandse kunst in het Rijksmuseum 1700–1800* (Amsterdam, 2006), no. 13 (text by Duncan Bull).

Provenance

- Charles-Auguste-Louis-Joseph de Morny (1811–65), Duc de Morny, Paris, by 1862.
- E. Martinet Collection, Paris (his sale, Chevalier Duchesne, Paris, 27 February 1896, no. 39).
- Boissière Collection, Paris (his sale, Chevallier, Hôtel Drouot, Paris, 19 February 1883, no. 46 [2,600 francs]).
- Sir Joseph Robinson, Bart (1840–1929), London (his sale, Christie's, London, 6 July 1923, no. 90, bought back); by descent to his daughter, Princess Ida Labia (1879–1961), Cape Town; by descent to her son (his sale, Sotheby's, London, 7 December 1988, no. 97).
- (Sale, Sotheby's, London, 11 December 2003, no. 68 [Salomon Lilian B. V., Amsterdam]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner.

Exhibition History

- London, Royal Academy of Arts, "The Robinson Collection: Paintings from the Collection of the late Sir J. B. Robinson, Bt.," 2 July–14 September 1958, no. 43 [lent by the Princess Ida Labia].
- Cape Town, South Africa, National Gallery of South Africa, "The Joseph Robinson Collection Lent by the Princess Labia," April 1959, no. 59 [lent by the Princess Ida Labia].



- Zurich, Kunsthaus, "Sammlung Sir Joseph Robinson 1840–1929 Werke europäischer Malerei vom 15. bis 19 Jahrhundert," 17 August–16 September 1962, no. 39 [lent by an heir of Princess Ida Labia].
- Ithaca, NY, Cornell University, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, "An Eye For Detail: Dutch Painting From The Leiden Collection," 20 September 2014–21 June 2015 [lent by the present owner].

References

- Vernier, Valery. *Les Joyaux de la peinture: La Galerie de M. le comte de Morny*. Paris, 1862, as by Jan Steen.
- Legrange, Léon. "La Galerie de M. le duc de Morny." *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 14 (1863): 299–300, as by Jan Steen.
- Hofstede de Groot, Cornelis. *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century Based on the Work of John Smith*. 8 vols. London, 1907–27, 1:67, no. 216, as by Jan Steen. Translated from *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*. 10 vols. Esslingen and Paris, 1907–28.
- "Collected by a South African Millionaire: Paintings from the Robinson Collection." *The Illustrated London News* 233, no. 6213 (1958): 30, as by Jan Steen.
- "The Robinson Pictures (Capetown's Gain: London's Loss)." *Connoisseur* 142 (November, 1958): 97, no. 7 and no. 43, as by Jan Steen.
- Braun, Karel. *Jan Steen: Alle tot nu toe bekende schilderijen*. Rotterdam, 1980, 147, no. A-125, as by Jan Steen.
- Hecht, Peter. *De Hollandse fijnschilders van Gerard Dou tot Adriaen van der Werff*. Amsterdam, 1989, 128, as by Jan Steen.

Versions

Versions and Copies

1. Follower of Jan Steen, *Wax Figure Seller*, oil on panel, 51.5 x 41 cm, current whereabouts unknown; formerly Engelbert Hendrik ter Kuile, Enschede; [D. Katz, Dieren]; (sale, Paul Brandt, Amsterdam, 16–19 May 1972, no. 92); L. Worms, Antwerp, by 1973.

Technical Summary

The support, a single piece of fine, plain-weave fabric, has been lined. All four tacking margins have been removed and paper tape extends into the face of the painting along all four sides. Cusping and old turnover creases along all four outer edges of the composition suggest the original image dimensions are about 2 cm smaller than the present stretcher dimensions in both directions. There are three paper labels but no wax seals, import stamps or stencils along the lining or stretcher.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied followed by paint applied with loose fluid brushstrokes in thin, smooth, glazes and no use of impasto.^[1]

The X-radiograph reveals an earlier composition, a half-length portrait of a young male gazing at the viewer, oriented upright, below the present composition.^[2] No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers and there are no compositional changes visible in the images or as pentimenti.

The painting is unsigned and undated. A “JSteen” signature previously located along the upper right corner of the architectural arch, was removed during a past conservation treatment because it was found to be soluble and thus believed to be false.

The painting was cleaned and restored in Amsterdam in 2004 and remains in a good state of preservation.

-Annette Rupprecht